

Teenage girls seek health info, Local conference informs on sex risks

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SAN BERNARDINO - Drawing teens to a Saturday morning educational workshop can be a challenge, but desperate problems call for urgent action.

Stephanie Leon, a 16-year-old Arroyo Valley High School student, woke early Saturday morning. No less than her life may be at stake.

"Sex and all the problems that come with it are everywhere - in school, after school, wherever," Stephanie said. "I came because I wanted to learn more about STDs and birth control, because a lot of times other girls ask me questions that I don't know how to answer."

Stephanie was one of more than 300 teenage girls who flocked to Cal State San Bernardino's Santos Manuel Student Union for the second annual Young Women's Health Conference. The girls, most from area high schools, chose from a gamut of educational seminars that tackled issues as sensitive as birth control and abusive relationships.

The conference, co-sponsored by Planned Parenthood and the university's Women's Resource Center, was more than twice as large as last year's debut event. Organizers attributed the turnout this year to outreach at area schools and the broad curriculum.

The conference was more than a series of tutorials about the dangers of unsafe sex. Interactive, free-flowing workshops ranging from nutrition to body image to educational and professional options after high school kept the girls riveted.

"The conference isn't just increasing in size, it's increasing in ability to educate and provide resources to help these young people make healthy lifestyle choices," said Robert Armenta Jr., Planned Parenthood's vice president of community affairs for Orange and San Bernardino counties.

Statistics show that girls in San Bernardino County get pregnant at among the highest rates in the state.

Although there has been some improvement in recent years, babies were born at a rate of 45.1 per every 1,000 females ages 15-19 in San Bernardino County in 2004, according to the California Department of Health Services. The statewide rate is 38.1 births per 1,000 teenage girls.

Conference organizers say the keys to their program's ability to register with fickle teens are relevant topics, interactive classroom atmospheres and session leaders who relate to the youth.

One local educator said the formula worked.

"I'm impressed; the lecturers are relating to kids - speaking to them in a way they understand about important subjects," said Karen Doring, a nurse at Eisenhower High School in Rialto who listened in on a workshop on teen pregnancy and STDs.

Stephanie Kight, a community affairs specialist from Planned Parenthood, said the conference should become a fixture in the area.

"A lot of these girls out here have dealt with a lot of life, "and they need the tools to deal with whatever else will confront them as they grow up ," Kight said ."